

121-28

4th Sunday after Epiphany

Jan. 31, 1988

He thought he was safe there. In that place where the scriptures were read, prayers were prayed, and men spoke of God. Like an escapee hiding in the shadow of the prison walls, he was ~~hardly~~ ^{not} noticed in ~~the place~~ ^{the synagogue} ~~where~~ ^{holiness was to reside.} The man with the unclean spirit.

Surely if the people had known they would have never let him in the door. With shouts and stánnews they would have driven him away, but he was hidden, behind the mask of respectability, Hidden among the folded hands and the bowed heads, a foul breath masked by mouth wash, ~~and mints.~~ An unclean spirit, but who could see that beneath the pressed white shirt, and well washed hands and face.

Yes, he thought he was safe, until that day.

~~Jesus~~ Jesus was there that day, teaching with authority. And that unclean spirit recognized Jesus and was recognized by him. ~~he~~ he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One ~~of~~ of God."

This was the unclean spirit speaking, that spirit not of God that owned, possessed this man. And he asked, "Have you come to destroy us?"

Who is this us? In the very next sentence the spirit spoke for himself, I know who you are. So who is us? The unclean sprit and the man whom he possessed. Jesus, have you come to do the flood again? To take sin and sinner and destroy ^{both} them. ~~That~~ The unclean spirit was saying, "This man is mine, if you are going to destroy me, you will have to destroy him too."

Then right there, in the synagogue, Jesus took charge and did for that man what ~~that~~ man could never do for himself, Jesus freed him from the grasp of the unclean spirit, saying, be silent and come out of him." Add the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice came out of him.

Jesus came to do battle with evil, ~~Unclean spirits~~ ~~Every unclean spirit~~ ~~that~~ ~~that~~ In teaching and healing and forgiving and dying and rising Jesus grappled with evil. He was not content to leave things

As they were, sinners, sinners, ^{the} sick, sick, and the dead dead.
He is not content to leave
this man under the control of a spirit only bent on destroying him. Any more than Jesus is willing to leave you under the power of spirits that are not from God. Greed, lust, hatred, despair, these can possess us, own us, control us until we are of no use to God and our neighbor. Right in the Holy Spirit temple of ~~God~~ these live, in me, in you. Spirits of pride ^{and} judging, causing us to look down our nose at another, spirits of selfishness, spirits of dishonesty. These can possess us just as surely and as dangerously as this spirit with whom Jesus did battle. Even more so, for we foolishly assume that we can handle these spirits all by ourselves with that favorite device called trying harder. I tell myself, I know I am greedy, but I will try harder not to let greed control me. Or I know I am unforgiving but I will try harder, then maybe I will overcome my hatred and anger.

x~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~

When Jesus drove out that unclean spirit, the man who was possessed did nothing. He could do nothing, for the spirit, not he, was in control.

In AA, that is the first thing the alcoholic must learn. I am powerless over alcohol. This is the first thing the hater must learn, I am powerless over my hatred. And the despairer, I am powerless over my despair.

But Jesus is not powerless. He can do in you the very things that you cannot, cast out the unclean spirits, keeping guard over your heart so that they may not enter again. We are powerless, but Christ is powerful.

Then why is it so hard for me to let Christ ~~xxxx~~ cast every unclean spirit out of me? Why can't I just let go, and get God? I think it is because my heart has so much trouble believing that Jesus can destroy the evil without destroying me. xxxxxxxspiritsxxxxfearxxxxgreed When Jesus drives evil out of me, will there be anything left. Will there be any me? ~~xxxxxxx~~ anythingxxxxleftxxxxtalkxxxxaboutxxxxwithxxxxanotherxxxxwhenxxxx Or will there be just an empty shell, once the evil is gone?

I remember how I felt before sickness caused me to stop smoking. I wondered, will life still be worth living without my cigarette, will I still be able to talk to people, write sermons, smile and laugh and feel

alive? I did not know. Would I still be me, without a cigarette.

I think of that man freed of the unclean spirit. He had to learn to live all over again. Though scripture does not tell us, maybe he went home that night and wondered, now what? I have a life, what shall I do with it?

Jesus once said this: When ~~the~~ unclean spirit has gone out of a man, he passes through waterless places, seeking rest; and finding none he says to himself, I will return to my house from which I came. And when he comes he finds it swept and put in order. Then he goes and brings seven ~~rather~~ p spirits more evil than himself and they enter and dwell there and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first.

For us it is not enough to be freed from the evil, we must be caught up in the good. Prayer, service, giving ourselves in Christ's battle against all that is evil, this keeps us from being an empty house inviting more evil in again.

Sometimes we in the church think that the Christian life is simply procuring a ticket to heaven. Jesus came and died so that we could someday know a better life.

While it is true that Christ wants us not only for now, but ~~for~~ all eternity, God is at war with evil, all evil, every evil, in us and in the world. Hunger, poverty, abuse adictions, crime, ^{greed} greed, ^{disloyalty} every form of evil, Christ will cast out. And you are the people he intends to do it in and through.

~~Today we have a meeting~~

Have you come to destroy us, the unclean spirit asks. The answer is no. No, Jesus will not destroy you, you who were ~~given~~ ^{born} birth in the water and the words, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. God intends that nothing will ever destroy that you.

But every unclean spirit in you, and in all the world Jesus will not tolerate. Do not fear that they should be driven out. Let God ~~fill~~ fill your heart instead with peace and hope and faith and joy and love. Let God fill your life instead with service and forgiveness, and sacrifice.

Let go, and let God. Amen.